

Molly Dowe  
Webster B7  
11/10/14

### Branded Messages: Social Media, Celebrities, and Teens

Twitter has more than 255 million users. There are fifty million Facebook pages. Twenty billion pictures have been uploaded to Instagram. These are just statistics for 2014 so far (Bennett). Who is using all of this social media? Teenagers. Thirty percent of millennials, who are people born between 1981 and the early 2000s, use four or more digital communications and check their phones up to forty times daily (Gianatasio). It is said that social media brings celebrities and fans closer together, creating an illusion of intimacy, which makes the fans more likely to listen to what the celebrities say (Beck). Although celebrities can use social media to bring awareness to important social issues, their use of it to promote causes, themselves, and, most importantly, products has negative effects on teenagers.

An important way celebrities use social media is to promote causes or political candidates. Often celebrities believe in these causes (like Perez Hilton and LGBTQ causes), but sometimes they are simply paired with a charity or non-profit because it is good exposure for both the celebrity and the cause (Bhusal). This kind of advocacy, whether it is an Instagram photo with a candidate or a tweet in support of a cause, is done because it works (Weisman). Scholars describe the process by which people are persuaded by celebrities as “identification”:

“Individuals go through the process of identification to the extent they come to believe in the values, convictions and

behaviors portrayed by the celebrity endorser and adopt them as their own.” (Austin, et al. 425)

Identification increases even more when celebrities are similar in age and gender to the people they seek to persuade (425).

Of course this kind of celebrity advocacy can have positive effects. It can raise awareness of social problems, as the current “It’s On Us” campaign to stop sexual assaults on campus does. This campaign, which features many celebrities like Jon Hamm and Questlove, works by “establishing shared responsibility” for solving the problem (Gianatasio). Other campaigns, like the ALS “Ice Bucket Challenge” that began in the summer of 2014 and asked participants to take the challenge and post their video on social media, become a huge social media phenomenon when celebrities participate. Over the summer, people posted 1.2 million videos on Facebook and mentioned the challenge 2.2 million times on Twitter (Steel).

Many of those people, however, participated in the campaign without really knowing anything about the cause it supported (the disease amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) and without donating any money. They just knew that everyone from Justin Timberlake to Kim Kardashian had done it, too. What if this superficial awareness were also applied to political candidates?

Celebrity support of political candidates may have less positive effects. According to a 2010 study, 93% of 18 year olds in the U.S. have a cell phone and 66% of them get their information about news and politics on it (Lenhart). One can only imagine these figures are higher in 2014. In addition, by 2020, millennials will make up 40% of eligible voters

(Gianatasio). Yet in the 140 characters of a celebrity's tweet or a photo of a celebrity with a candidate posted on Facebook, it is impossible to go into depth about issues, or give any (or very little) context. A celebrity endorsement of a candidate is just as superficial as an endorsement of a product.

More than anything else, celebrities also use social media to promote themselves and “build their brand.” On Twitter, for example, “celebrity is practiced through the appearance and performance of ‘backstage’ access,” revealing “what appears to be personal information to create a sense of intimacy between participant and follower” (Marwick). Lady Gaga is said to be very good at this:

“She tweets hints, teasers, and riddles about upcoming albums, tours, and videos to keep her fans guessing. She shares information about the creation process, offers photos peeking at her inside life, and keeps her fans on the edge of their seats.” (Cohen)

Celebrities also are very strategically aware of their social media presence, treating each network as they would treat a different person. An example of this is Taylor Swift and her competent ability to use all of her social media in very effective marketing ways (Weber). The result, of course, is that teenage fans are constantly checking their social media accounts for updates about celebrities instead of engaging with real friends and real life.

One result of this celebrity adoration is that young people often think that fame is a thing to strive for—not being famous for doing something, just being famous for being

famous, like the Kardashians. Many kids watch YouTube videos and try to achieve fame in that way themselves, thinking it simple to produce a huge fan following. “What happens to kids when they start organizing their lives around the logic of the brand?” asks Sarah Banet-Weiser, an associate professor at USC’s Annenberg School of Communication. “Social media is centered around the discourse of becoming a star. We are witnessing young people build a career of life-casting before they are even done with high school” (Hawgood).

Celebrities often use social media to promote many different brands and products, and kids may be affected by the advertising done by celebrities on social media more often than anyone else. Celebrities send out sponsored tweets and Facebook posts, sometimes without making clear that they are sponsored (Cohen). Some A-list celebrities can be paid as much as \$20,000 for a Twitter post or Facebook update, and Khloe Kardashian makes about \$13,000 for every branded tweet (Kornowski). Companies believe they gain quite a bit by paying celebrities so much to sponsor them. One example is Kim Kardashian posting on Twitter: “Pregnancy lips @EOS to the rescue!” along with a picture of her using the lip balm, but without any admission that this was a paid endorsement (Bilton). Another example is Justin Bieber’s tweet about 1-800-flowers for Mother’s Day (Bieber). Bieber has 44 million fans on Facebook and 23 million followers on Twitter (Beck). There was no awareness for many fans that the tweet was part of a marketing campaign. It was retweeted 75 thousand times and made a favorite by 51 thousand fans (“Celebrity”).

Athletes are supposedly the best role models for healthy, active lifestyles. But in a report published in *Pediatrics*, “Of the 46 beverages endorsed by professional athletes 93% relied on exclusively on sugar for all of their calories” (Sifferlin). Seeing a celebrity talk about using something makes many people think that buying whatever has been endorsed is a good idea but it could be detrimental to their lives. For example, recently LeBron James retweeted two tweets from Sprite® about his new cherry and orange flavored Sprite (Sprite). This shows James endorsing something that he most likely does not drink regularly because it would be detrimental to his health.

Under Federal Trade Commission guidelines, celebrities risk being misleading by not noting that these endorsements are advertisements (Bilton). “Like advertorials and infomercials, with Twitter, our view would be that the consumers have a right to know. It gives them additional information. . . . It’s a new day, with a new way, but an old issue,” says Andrea C. Levine of the Council of Better Business Bureaus (Bilton). The F.T.C. says that advertisements via Twitter pages should incorporate the hashtag “#ad” but this is very difficult for them to enforce (“Celebrity”).

Overall, celebrity use of social media to market things has negative effects on teens because sometimes teens do not think for themselves. Teens often only end up having superficial knowledge of much of the world around them because celebrities use social media to tell teens what to buy, who to vote for, and how to adore them. Kids have to be encouraged to go out and do their own research in order to make their own decisions. They must be taught to use social media properly or they will develop beliefs that are not their own. Teens must have their own thoughts and not become brainwashed by

celebrities. If they don't, this world will become a place filled with more ignorance than there already is, and that is not a future that anyone wants to see.

## Works Cited

- Austin, Erica W., Rebecca Van De Vord, et al. "Celebrity Endorsement and Their Potential to Motivate Young Voters." *Mass Communication and Society* 11.4 (2008): 420-36. Print.
- Bennett, Shea. "Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Vine, Snapchat--Social Media Stats 2014." *Mediabistro.com*. Prometheus Global Media. 9 Jun. 2014. Web. 6 Nov. 2014.
- Beck, Melinda. "Inside the Brains of Bieber Fans." *Wsj.com*. The Wall Street Journal. 26 Jun. 2012. Web. 16 Oct. 2014.
- Bhusal, Aram. "A Look at How Celebrities Are Using Social Media." *Nextbigwhat.com*. 17 Jan. 2012. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- Bieber, Justin (justinbieber). "Everybody knows I love #MyMom! @1800flowers Mother's Day is on Sunday! Love your mamma! Love u @pattiemallete - <http://bit.ly/YmjAJ1>." 9 May 2013, 5:30 AM. Tweet.
- Bilton, Nick. "Social Media Product Plugs Draw Scrutiny." *The New York Times*. 10 Jun. 2013: B1. Print.
- "Celebrity Twitter Ads: Regulations, Allegations and Selling Out." *Brandwatch.com*. Brandwatch. n.d. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- Cohen, Phillip. "How Celebrities Use Social Media to Build Their Brand." *Socialmediatoday.com*. Social Media Today. 24 Jun. 2013. Web. 17 Oct. 2014.
- Gianatasio, David. "Tapping Millennial Political and Social Passions Ahead of the Midterm Elections." *Adweek.com*. Adweek. 6 Oct. 2014. Web. 17 Oct. 2014.

- Hawgood, Alex. "No Stardom Until After Homework." *Nytimes.com*. The New York Times. 15 Jul. 2011. Web. 23 Oct. 2014.
- Kornowski, Liat. "Celebrity Sponsored Tweets: What The Stars Get Paid For Advertising in 140 Characters." *Huffingtonpost.com*. Huffington Post. 11 Nov. 2013. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- Lenhart, Amanda. "Social Media and Young Adults." *Pewinternet.org*. Pew Research. 3 Feb. 2010. Web. 28 Oct. 2014.
- Marwick, Alice, and Danah Boyd. "To See and Be Seen: Celebrity Practice on Twitter." *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 17.2 (2011): 139-58. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- Sifferlin, Alexandra. "When Good Celebrities Promote Bad Foods." *Time.com*. Time Inc. 7 Oct. 2013. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.
- Sprite (Sprite). "The wait is over! Sprite #6Mix by @KingJames is in stores now. Enjoy the taste of greatness. #ChangeTheGame." 20 Mar 2014, 7:02 AM. Tweet.
- Sprite (Sprite). "It's official! #6Mix is about to be on shelves nationwide. #ChangeTheGame <http://SpriteURL.com/6MixSpot>." 19 Mar. 2014, 2:14 PM. Tweet.
- Steel, Emily. "'Ice Bucket Challenge' Has Raised Millions for ALS Association." *Nytimes.com*. The New York Times. 17 Aug. 2014. Web. 28 Oct. 2014.
- Weber, Lindsey. "Taylor Swift Is the Reigning Queen of Celebrity Social Media." *Vulture.com*. New York Magazine. 29 Oct. 2014. Web. 29 Oct. 2014.



Weisman, Aly. "Here's How Celebs Are Sneakily Promoting Products and You Don't Even Realize It." *Businessinsider.com*. Business Insider. 24 Aug. 2012. Web. 26 Oct. 2014.